

Our Faith in a Wonderful King

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November 20, 2016

This is the last Sunday of the Christian calendar year and next Sunday is the first Sunday of the Christian calendar year. That Christian calendar year basically begins with the birth of Jesus as a baby and follows his life to his being recognized as King of Kings. We're going to talk today about our faith in this wonderful king.

Our text that will launch our talking about this is from John. John records seven earth-shaking statements of Jesus and each has a supporting miracle. So Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," and then he feeds the 5,000. In our passage today we are in the seventh of the statements and miracles. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life," and right after this raises Lazarus from the dead.

This is a relevant passage for Christ the King Sunday because it is right after this, and somewhat because of this, that Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and is hailed as king with "Hosannas."

Before I read the text, let me introduce you to its context. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus have been friends of Jesus for quite some time. If you were in the old city of Jerusalem at sunrise, the rays would

come to you almost directly from Bethany just a mile or two away. Lazarus has died. Everyone's thought is that *if* Jesus had been there sooner, Lazarus wouldn't have died. So there's a cup of grief with a tablespoon of dismay and a pinch of concern.

The Mary and Martha of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are well known for one sitting at Jesus' feet while the other busied herself with hostess duties. Mary gets commended for sitting at Jesus' feet and Martha seems to get chastised for her busyness. But let's see Martha rehabilitated a bit here. Martha should be recognized, I think, for being the first to Jesus. Despite her grief and worry, she rises to meet Jesus. Sometimes grief can be so weighty, enervating, dulling. With her grief and worry, she goes to Jesus. With her frustration or dismay, she doesn't avoid him. She goes to Jesus. She will, without even knowing it, tell us about faith, our faith in the one who will be the king.

²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

³⁴ “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

I once read a devotional booklet that had this passage. Its comments were under the title, “The Courage of Faith.” That title worried me a bit. We’ve been raised on The Red Badge of Courage and Profiles in Courage. In the church we hearken to Hebrews 11 and try to draw inspiration from the courage in that “hall of fame.” Our innate tendency is to stick out our chests and say, “I will be a man, a woman of courageous faith!” Then we’ll be proud of ourselves. God will be proud of us. Yeah.

But the problems is, “What about when we are not courageous?” Is there a cowardly faith? How many of us know that we are pretty cowardly inside? Or if I were to ask how many of you have done more than one cowardly thing here and there, how many hands would go up? There’s been a call for prayer and we have been flat footed, a push for mission and we’ve run the other way, a chance to say that we personally are ambassadors for Jesus Christ and we’ve been silent or worse.

See, we’re not saved by a courageous faith. We simply are not. And thank God. Because from Peter on the night Jesus was betrayed to me here today, we human beings are a lot like the Lion in the Wizard of Oz. We’re a least some of the time cowardly. We need a faith that works when we are courageous *and* when we are not. We are not saved by courageous faith but simply by faith.

John uses the word, “belief.” It is the same as faith. It is key in our passage. Jesus asks, “Do you *believe* this?” Then he asserts, “Didn’t I tell you that if you *believed*, you’d see the glory of God?” So I want to look with you today at just belief, biblical belief. I want us to look at the what of belief, the who of belief, and the how of belief.

The what of belief. There are a number of things which belief is not. When I first started seminary I took a class on chemical dependence in the

church. Lots of people in our congregations, we were told, would be dealing with addiction problems and so this class. Part of the homework was to go to some AA meetings. I have the utmost respect for AA. I wish the kind of openness about our disasters and struggles that I saw and heard in AA meetings were more a part of the church generally than it is.

But now having said that I did find in a meeting someone saying something that didn't make sense to me. Believing in a higher power is an important part of the healing process for AA. But what caught me one day was when one person was saying that you just have to believe in something outside yourself. "It could be that tree out there or this stuffed animal over here. What's important is just that you believe."

Excuse me? The important thing is to *just believe*? The process of believing in itself counts? Isn't it also important *what* we believe? From Peter Pan to Cinderella we adore children's ability to just believe and are a little sad at children becoming more adult and loss of this believe-ability. And it is almost as if what is valued is the experience of believing rather than what we believe. But that's *not* what the Bible means when it talks about belief.

Look at this old cartoon from Saturday Evening Post. "I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you ... by George, I think I've talked myself into

it.” Frankly, this is what many people who don’t



follow Jesus think goes on in churches – and sometimes with good cause. We haven’t always been very thoughtful about what we believe. But this isn’t what belief in the Bible really is

either. It isn’t talking yourself over the ledge. It isn’t joining a zombie chorus of “I believe, I believe, I believe.” It isn’t us being like lemmings stampeding over a faith cliff. Us being gullible.¹

Nor is belief in the Bible something built on self-interest. This is very important. If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say that they believed

¹ Did you know that “gullible” is NOT in the dictionary? Oh, come on. Don’t be so gullible!

in God once, then their loved one died and now they don't believe in him. Now I do understand grief and disappointment. But belief in the Bible is bigger and different than, "If you don't come through for me the way I think it should be, God, I won't believe in you." The White House disappoints me regularly but I believe it is still there. Medicine doesn't come through for us on many, many occasions but I still lean on doctors. And Jesus didn't get to Bethany precisely when Mary, Martha, and Lazarus wanted. But we see from Martha that there was still something going on between her heart and Jesus. And that in its most simple terms is what belief is in the Bible – something going on between our heart, our mind, and Jesus. Faith is getting up and going ... to Jesus. Getting up and going is faith ... to Jesus ...

Jesus, then, is **the Who of Belief**. There's a subject, a verb, and an object. Jesus is the object. It's interesting that when their conversation first began Jesus asked, "Do you believe that your brother will rise?" and she gave the perfect Sunday School answer. I know he'll rise at Judgment Day. Then Jesus says, Martha, the resurrection is not a future event but a present person, not a distant occurrence but a powerful person. And I am he. The content of belief is not a creed to be recited but a person to hold on to.

Lazarus represented a lot for Martha. No mention is made of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha having families so the thought is that they just had each

other. He was a brother and, being a single woman probably, he was her protector and provider. What Isaac was to Abraham, Lazarus was in a sense to Mary and Martha. Only Isaac was spared death and Lazarus wasn't.

Wanting Lazarus to be alive was nothing bad. We'd have said to her, this is God's heart too. But then God didn't rescue him. Yet stripped of even this Martha is with Jesus. Like Job with loss all around, she says, I may not sense much else than that there is a redeemer and he lives.

This, I submit to you, is belief according to the New Testament. It isn't perfect understanding. My goodness, no. Martha tells Jesus she knows about rising and facing judgment at the Last Day. He says, the resurrection and life is not a future event but a present person. She doesn't say, "Huh???" But she may as well have. A few moments later when Jesus is set to call Lazarus out of the tomb, who's protesting? Martha. "No, Lord, for he stinketh." Not clear and full understanding of Jesus.

But that's not what is most crucial. Martha, being stripped of Lazarus, simply clung to Jesus. Jesus in a few short days would be stripped too of everything and hang on a cross. She hung on that Jesus. That's what belief in the Bible is. It isn't just a process of believing. It isn't something we talk ourselves into. It isn't something that only works when we get what we want. It is a clinging to Jesus.

The *what* of belief is clinging. The *who* of belief is Jesus.

Now, **the how of belief**. I so appreciate my dear friend Maryanne Smith. Maryanne's husband became a Christian. She wanted to. She really did. But she couldn't *make* herself believe. I so appreciated her honesty and maybe this is, in fact, going on for you. In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice or someone says, "Every day I try to believe six impossible things before breakfast." Well, it's just hard to make yourself believe stuff.

We do have to want faith that seeks understanding. A mechanic's faith in a car is different than mine. He has so much understanding that his faith is confidence. Mine is just faith. So our seeking good understanding is part of the process. Bring your mind to the Bible and seek Jesus.

But we want more. We can understand honey but isn't what we need the taste of honey? How can we taste Jesus?

I want to suggest a help. A way to enter belief is to look at Jesus. When babies are born, mother and child, father and child, spend a lot of time looking at each other. Psychologists talk about how this looking creates bonding. Hormones, chemicals in the brain are released causing positive emotion and attachment. So look at Jesus.

And since we are in this John 11 passage, I want you to begin by seeing three particular things

about Jesus here. As you see the beauty of these, I think you will find bringing belief up into your soul. First, not even death can make Jesus late. It may feel like he's late to us and one of the reasons is that we think that if he isn't here right at this time, something irreversible or irreparable or second best will happen. But Jesus can reverse even death and what Jesus gives is better than what Martha could have imagined. Wow. Not even death can make Jesus late. See this Jesus.

Two, when Jesus is about to call Lazarus out and Martha protests, he says to her, "Didn't I tell you that you would see the glory of God?" What had Jesus initially told Martha? It was this – I am the resurrection and the life. So here at the tomb the glory of God and the resurrection and the life are equated. The glory of Fabio is hair. The glory of Michael Jordan was his basketball hang time. The glory of NASA was its spectacular space launch. Well, the glory of Jesus is raising people from the dead. See this Jesus.

Three, and I'll end with this, the shortest verse in the Bible is in chapter 11. "Jesus wept." I suppose he wept because he saw the pain of losing someone. He saw the family and village in distress. He probably pondered how generation after generation families have wept at this needn't-to-have-happened loss. He may have thought about Lazarus' frustration at leaving his sisters and struggling with the thought of

who would care for them. Poor guy. But could part of those tears have been simply his? That he was thinking about his own tomb, that he who was embodied eternal life was going to ... die? That he who was always joyfully the light of the world was going to be ... extinguished? That the only way Lazarus could come out of his tomb ... or you and I ... was for Jesus to go in, take his place, and close the door behind him? The love of Jesus ... and the courage ... here's the one; here's the courage that saves – Jesus. Through his tears here, through the tears of Gethsemane, he moves ... for nothing else than you and me. See Him.

This faith ... not a courageous faith in Jesus but a faith in a courageous Jesus, not a great faith in Jesus but a faith in a great Jesus. See, and go to, and cling to Him, the Wonderful King.